

Measuring Satisfaction with the City of Atlanta's Permitting Process

Kelly N. Foster
Richard L. Clark

Prepared for
The City of Atlanta Bureau of Buildings

March 2006



Carl Vinson **Institute of Government**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Results	7
Overall Satisfaction with Permitting Process	8
Responses for Intake Department	14
Responses for Zoning Department	18
Responses for Site Development Department	21
Responses for Arborist Department	25
Responses for Plan Review Department	28
Responses for Inspection Department	32
Feedback for Other Departments	36
Conclusions	37
Appendices¹	39
A: Frequency Tables for All Questions	39
B: Verbatim Responses for Suggestions to Improve Permitting Process	59
C: Verbatim Responses Regarding Reasons for Dissatisfaction	115

¹ Although the appendices are referenced in the Table of Contents and throughout the report, they have been removed for this summary version of the final report. All the content and analysis of the report remains unchanged. The only difference between the two reports is that this summary version does not include the appendices.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2005, Georgia Power Corporation, commissioned the Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVIOG) to conduct surveys of those who have applied for a building permit with the City of Atlanta. Georgia Power commissioned these surveys on behalf of and at the request of the City of Atlanta. This donation is intended to provide the City of Atlanta with timely and actionable data to assist in identifying and improving the customer's experience with the permitting process. These data will further serve as the base line from which the City of Atlanta Bureau of Buildings will measure experience and satisfaction in the future.

The survey asked respondents about their experiences with the City of Atlanta permitting process in general as well as asking about specific departments involved in the permitting process.

The survey findings include the following:

- The vast majority of respondents (78 percent) have applied for more than one permit with the City of Atlanta.
- While it appears that most respondents are having similar experiences with the permitting process, those who have had repeat experiences are slightly more likely to hold critical views than are those who have had only one experience.
- Among those who have had repeat experiences with the City of Atlanta, 36 percent feel that the customer service has gotten better over the past 3 years.
- In general, timeliness is an area of concern for many respondents. A plurality of respondents (38 percent) feel that it took too long to complete the permitting process.
- The most prevalent ideas for improving the City of Atlanta's permitting process are increasing overall efficiency (22 percent), increasing the number of staff (12 percent), increasing and improving communication with customers (10 percent), reorganizing staff and departments (9 percent), and making more information available online (7 percent).

INTRODUCTION

The City of Atlanta Bureau of Buildings is part of the Bureau of Planning and Community Development and it exists to review, approve, and issue all building permits within the city limits. The mission of the Bureau of Buildings is to “safeguard public health, safety, and general welfare by enforcing the building codes adopted by the City of Atlanta.” The Bureau of Buildings seeks to become a modern, dynamic, and efficient organization which places a top priority on being customer friendly².

Based on previous information gathered from customer feedback, the City of Atlanta provided the Carl Vinson Institute of Government Survey Research Unit with areas of concern surrounding the permitting process. These general areas were then used to design a survey which would provide timely data that the City of Atlanta could then use to understand and improve the customer experience. Although the Bureau of Buildings is the primary point of entry for most permit applications in the City of Atlanta, some permits will be handled by departments not under the purview of the Bureau of Buildings. The survey design took this into account and designed modules which reflect the permitting process as a whole.

The funding for this project was provided by the Georgia Power Corporation as a donation to the City of Atlanta.

² City of Atlanta Bureau of Buildings. Information gathered from website which was accessed on March 15, 2006. <http://www.atlantaga.gov/government/planning/burofbuildings.aspx>

METHODOLOGY

In order to generalize to the population of permit applicants, the Institute of Government needed to select potential respondents in an unbiased and scientific way. This was done following the simple rules of probability sampling.

The Bureau of Buildings provided CVIOG with information gathered when a customer applies for a building permit. This information is gathered using the KIVA system which captures information such as contact names and numbers, type of permit requested, and a description of the project among other things. Customers who applied for a permit during the months of May through December of 2005 formed the basis for the sampling population. For each building permit application, customers are asked to provide 3 points of contact: applicant, contact person, and professional³. In order to get representation from each type of contact we first randomly chose either “Applicant”, “Contact”, or “Professional” from each record to be the respondent for that permit. If the “Contact” or “Professional” information was not complete, the “Applicant” was used as the default; in the cases where the “Applicant” information was not complete, the “Professional” contact information was the default. In a case where the sample file had two phone numbers for a single contact, we selected the first phone number provided as the primary contact number and the second number as a secondary contact.

Before selecting the sample records, we checked for duplicates among the selected respondents so that no individual or business appeared in the sample more than once. We did this so as not to disturb individuals or businesses with many permit applications several times in a single iteration of the survey. If an individual or business had more than one permit application, we randomly selected one permit to be included and removed the others from the sample.

Records from the sample list were assigned random numbers and were grouped according to the random value in order to eliminate selection bias. The phone center received the randomly selected potential respondents and attempted to complete interviews according to the group order assigned by the Institute of Government in the sampling process.

The phone center also received instructions with each permit as to which questions to ask of each respondent. Because some permit types will necessarily interact with specific departments in the City of Atlanta and not with others, we tailored our survey to reflect the departments most likely involved based on the permit type. This information was provided to the survey research team by the client. A specific set of questions, or module,

³ While the KIVA system does collect information for contact, applicant, and owner it is not required that each one be filled out with valid information. As was often the case, the person applying for the permit would put only a business name and phone number with no real person to serve as a point of contact. This made it especially difficult to narrow down the person who dealt directly with the specific permit application that was being surveyed.

was created for most departments involved in the permitting process⁴. Respondents, being called in reference to a specific permit application, were given the questions most relevant to that permit type. The relationship between the potential respondent and set of relevant survey questions was pre-determined in the sampling process based on client-provided records that showed connection between permit type and departments.

These data were collected via phone survey in two separate iterations. The first contained those who applied for a permit in May, June, July, or August of 2005. This first iteration was conducted between November 8 and December 2, 2005. There were 402 completed interviews for this iteration. The second iteration included those who had applied for a permit in September, October, November, or December of 2005. This second iteration was conducted between December 15th, 2005 and January 24 2006. There were 600 completed interviews for this iteration for a combined base line total of 1,002 completed interviews.

⁴ The client provided the survey research team with a list of departments selected for inclusion in the survey.

RESULTS

All respondents were asked a series of questions about their overall satisfaction with the City of Atlanta permitting process. Respondents were also asked about specific areas of concern that had been determined from previous customer feedback.⁵ These questions are intended to provide actionable data that may be used to improve the customer experience. For a complete list of all tables and responses, please see Appendix A⁶.

There are slight differences in levels of satisfaction from those who responded to the first iteration and those who responded in the second iteration. Respondents from iteration #2 seem to be slightly more satisfied than those in iteration #1. The differences are so small that it is difficult to make any meaningful projections as to why. It is possible that changes in the City of Atlanta permitting process are having a slight impact on customer perception and satisfaction although it would take substantially longer than the 3 weeks that separate iteration #1 and #2 to see dramatic changes in levels of satisfaction. While we may occasionally show differences where they exist, due to the weak relationship between the above-mentioned groups we find it best for the purposes of this report to present overall satisfaction without breaking out these two groups.

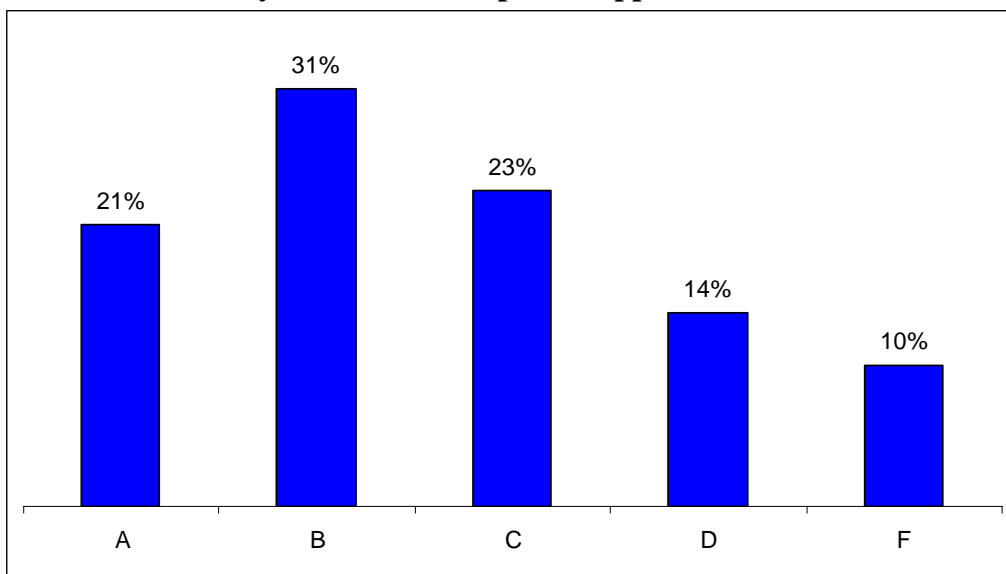
⁵ The City of Atlanta Bureau of Buildings provides several means for customer feedback. The survey was designed keeping some of these concerns in mind.

⁶ Each question allowed for the respondent to reply that they did not know the answer or refuse the question all together. However, most charts included in this report do not include the “Don’t know” or “Refused” options therefore charts will not necessarily equal 100%. Frequencies for all response options, including “Don’t know” and “Refused” can be found in Appendix A.

Overall Satisfaction with Permitting Process

In order gauge overall satisfaction, we asked respondents to grade the City of Atlanta on how they handled the respondent's most recent permit application. Overall, respondents give the City of Atlanta high marks. A majority (52 percent) of respondents give the city either an "A" or a "B" (21 percent and 31 percent, respectively). While marks are generally high, one quarter of respondents gave the City of Atlanta permitting process a D or F. (see Figure 1). While respondents were allowed to give either a + or – to each grade, most chose the straight grade of A, B, C, D, or F.

Figure 1. What grade would you give the City of Atlanta on how they have handled your most recent permit application?



Most of those who responded to the survey are not new to the City of Atlanta permitting process. In fact, 78 percent of respondents have applied for more than one permit with the City of Atlanta. There are some slight differences in levels of satisfaction by different customer types. Those respondents who have only had one experience with the City of Atlanta permitting process are slightly more positive than are those with repeat experiences. While we cannot be certain of the reason for this, some verbatim responses indicate that those with repeat experiences also have experiences with other county and city planning offices. It is feasible that this group of individuals grade the City of Atlanta not solely on its actions, but how its permitting process compares to other counties or cities.

When asked about coordination between city offices, slightly more than half of respondents say that city offices worked extremely well or somewhat well when it came to handling their most recent permit application (20 percent and 34 percent, respectively) (see Figure 2). In general, respondents are somewhat more likely to say that it was easy to get information about the progress of their permit than are those who say it was difficult (51 percent and 43 percent, respectively) but only marginally so (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. How well do you feel all the City offices worked together when it came to handling your permit application?

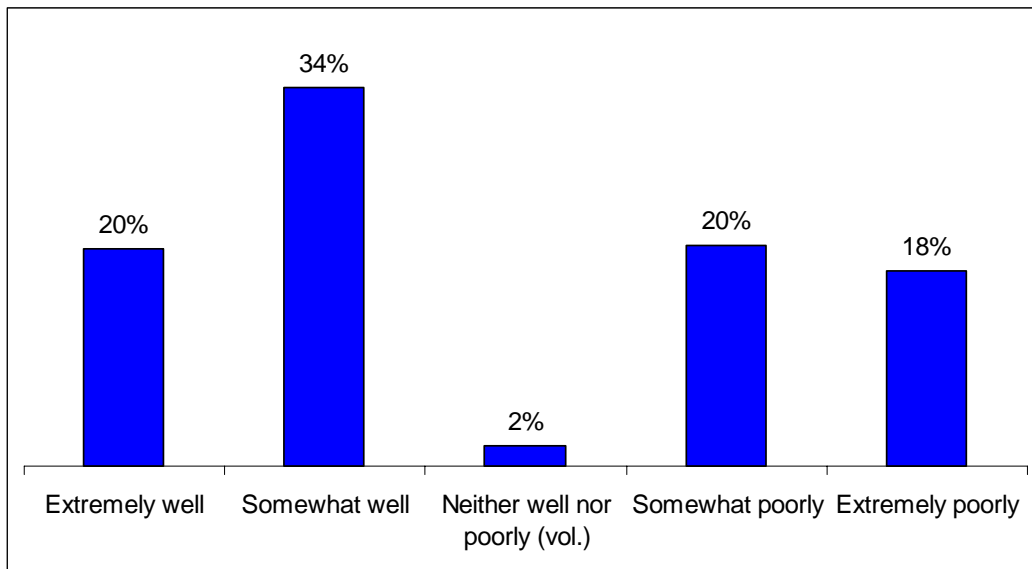
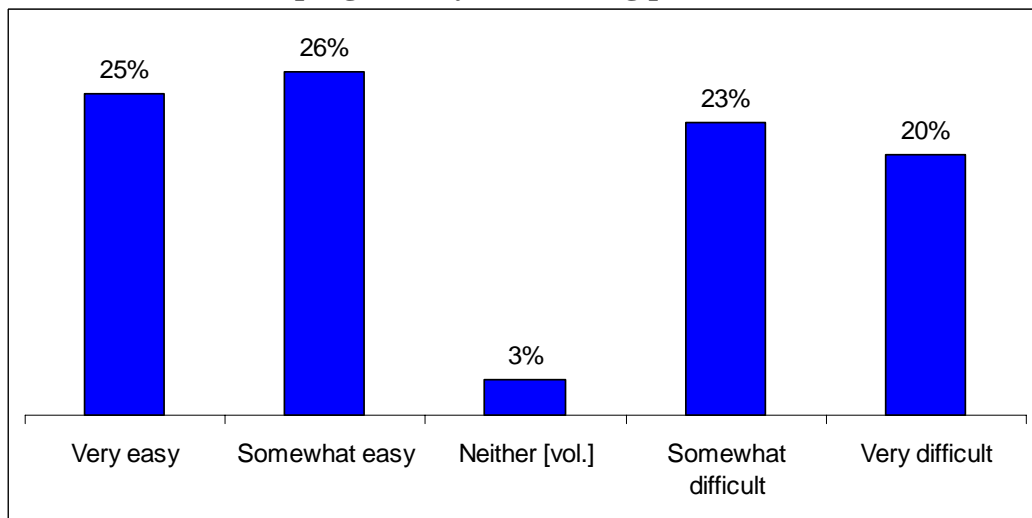


Figure 3. Would you say it was easy or difficult to get information about the progress of your building permit?



Thirty-eight percent of respondents who had received their permit at the time of the survey say that it took too long to get their permit. Thirty-five percent say the time required was reasonable, while 26 percent say it was a relatively quick process (see Figure 4).

Forty-one percent of those who have had repeat experiences feel that it took too long to get their permit compared with only 30 percent of those who have had only one experience (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Was the time required to complete the overall permitting process quick, reasonable, or did it take too long? (N = 764)

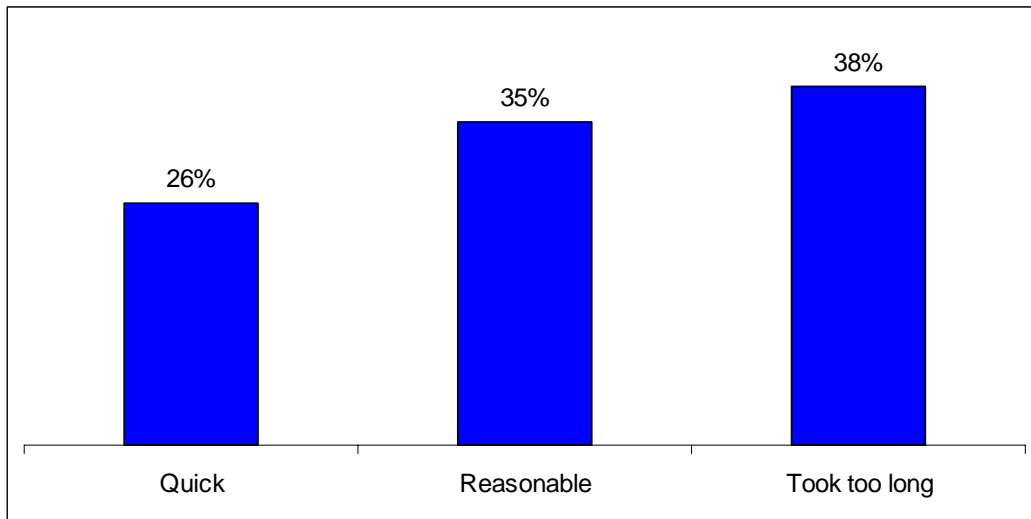
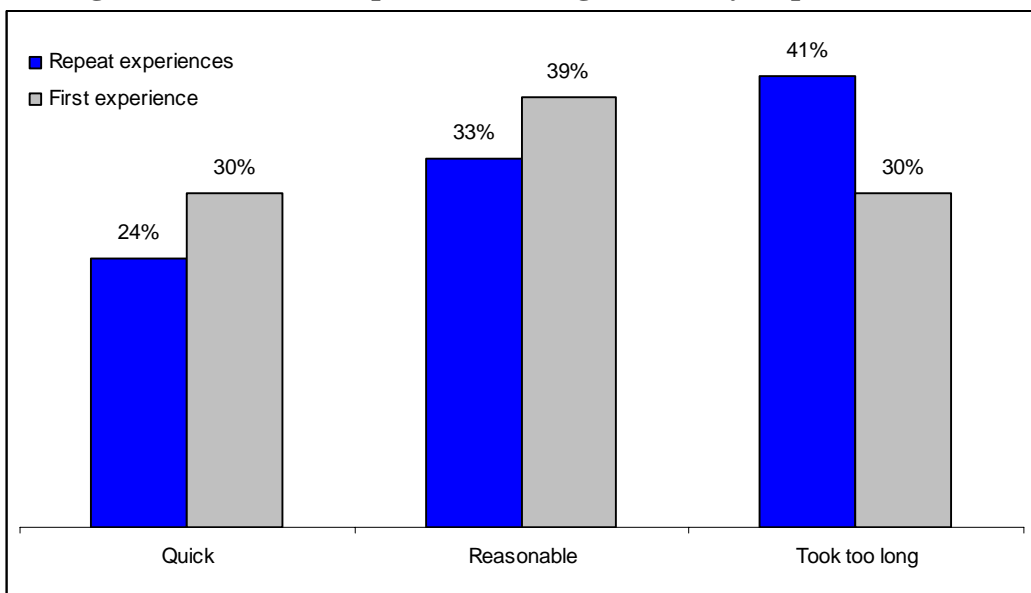
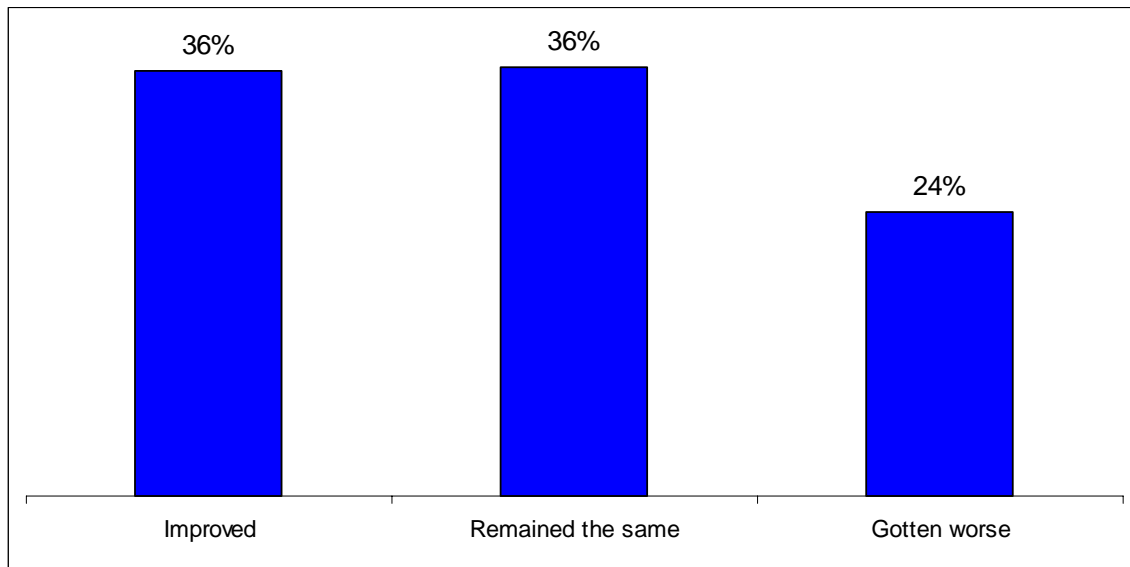


Figure 5. Time to Complete Permitting Process by Experience Level



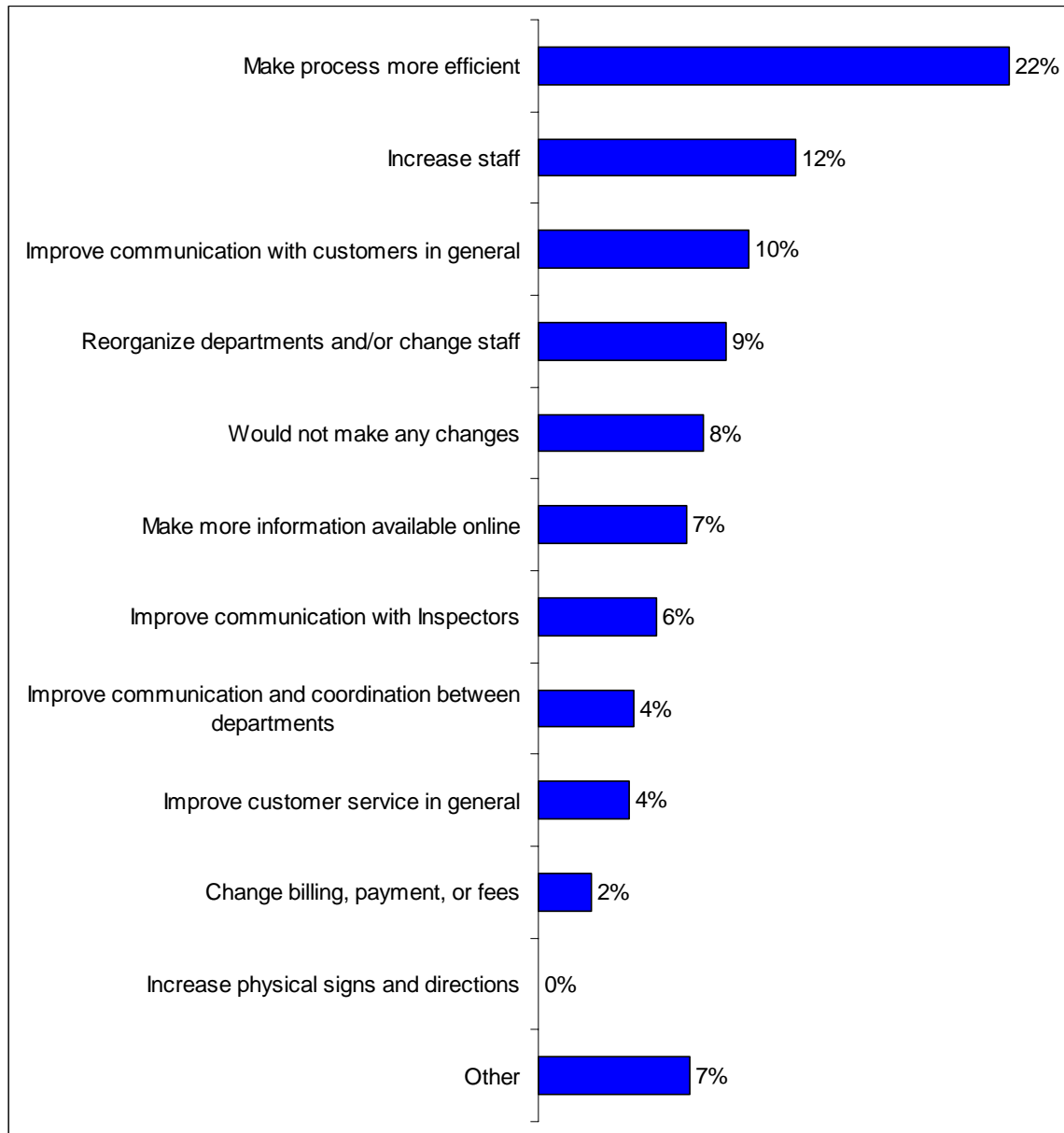
Despite occasionally lower levels of satisfaction from those with repeat experiences, the majority of those who have been through the City of Atlanta permitting process multiple times (N= 776) feel that customer service is either getting better or remaining the same. Thirty-six percent of respondents who are repeat customers say customer service has improved in the past 3 years and another thirty-six percent say it has remained the same. Twenty-four percent of respondents say customer service around the permitting process has gotten worse (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Do you feel that the customer service you have received has improved, remained the same, or gotten worse? (N = 776)



In order to provide the customer with the option of giving constructive feedback to the City of Atlanta, we asked respondents “If you could make one improvement to the City of Atlanta’s permitting process, what would that be?” While there is no clear majority sentiment, the most frequently occurring response was to make the permitting process more efficient (22 percent of respondents). The next most frequently cited responses were to increase the number of staff (12 percent), to increase communication with customers (10 percent), and to reorganize departments and make staffing changes (9 percent) (see Figure 7). For complete verbatim responses, see appendix B.

Figure 7. If you could make one improvement to the City of Atlanta's permitting process, what would that be?



Satisfaction with Individual Departments

Respondents were selected to answer questions about a given department based on the type of permit they applied for, as detailed in the methodology section. Each module asked questions of particular concern to that department as well as questions on helpfulness and courtesy which were asked for virtually every department.

Of the 10 departments selected by the client for individual modules, only 6 received enough responses to be reported. Public Works and Traffic, Fire, Urban Design, and Bureau of Planning received 5 or fewer respondents and therefore cannot be reported⁷ (see Table 1). While we will not report the questions from the modules for these departments, they may still receive feedback from those respondents who self-identified that they had contact with that department. For more information, please see section entitled “Other Department Feedback”. The departments we will report module data for are: Intake, Zoning, Site Development, Arborist, Plan Review, and Inspections. Below you will find the number of responses by workgroup.

Table 1. Number of Completed Interviews by Department

Intake	41
Zoning	471
Site Development	104
Arborist	117
Plan Review	323
Public Works/ Traffic	3
Fire Safety	5
Inspections	525
Urban Design Commission	0
Bureau of Planning	0

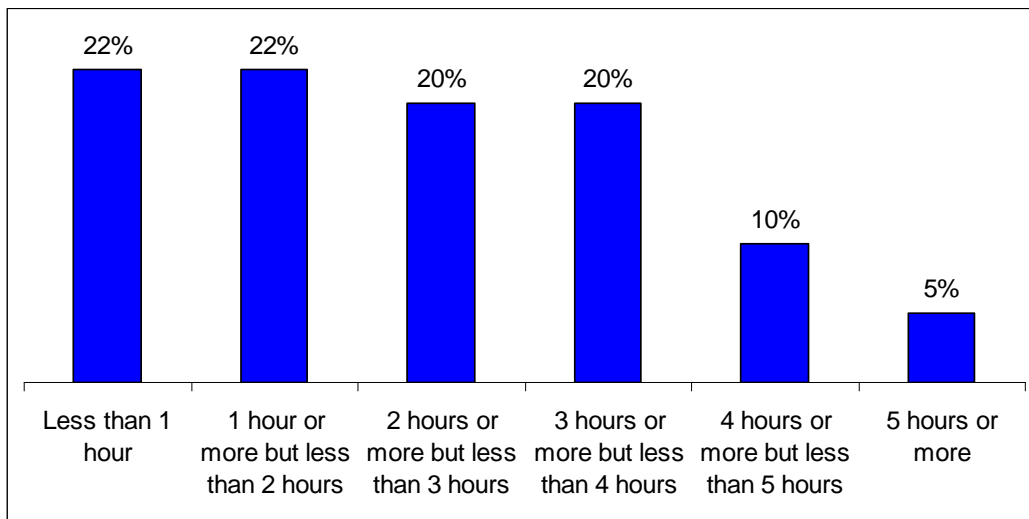
⁷ With numbers so small, it is not possible to break out frequency reporting in any meaningful manner.

Intake Department

Often the first formal contact that customers have with the City of Atlanta permitting process is the Intake Department. Here customers are provided information about the permitting process, are given answers to questions, and provided physical directions from one department to the other.

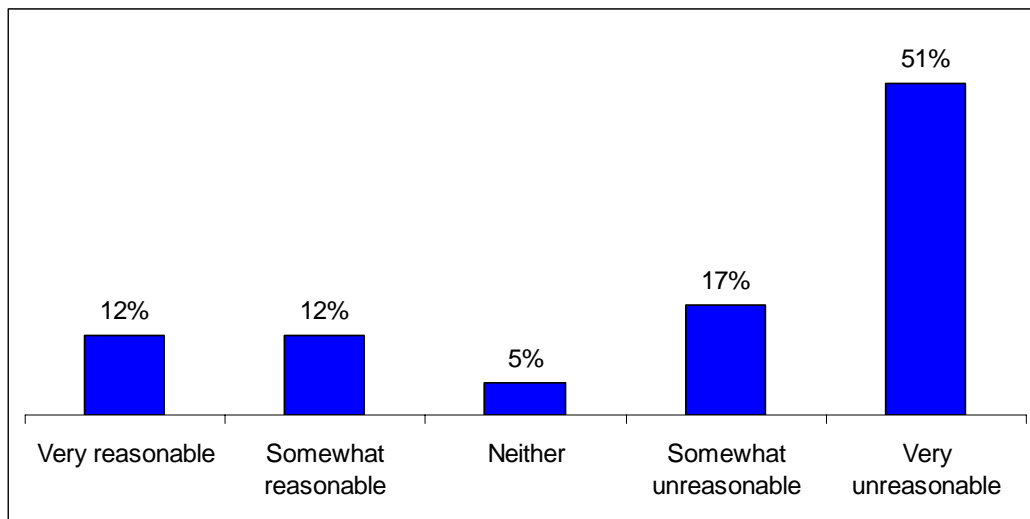
Of those respondents who dealt directly with the intake department⁸, 22 percent had to wait less than 1 hour to be seen by someone. An additional 22 percent had to wait longer than 1 hour but less than two and 20 percent had to wait longer than 2 hours but less than three. Thirty-five percent had to wait 3 hours or longer (see Figure 8). The majority of respondents (51 percent) feel that their wait time was very unreasonable. An additional 17 percent feel that it was somewhat unreasonable (see Figure 9).

Figure 8. How long did you have to wait at the Intake Department before you were seen by a staff member?



⁸ N = 41. It is important to note here that we are dealing with small numbers for this department.

Figure 9. Was your wait time at the Intake Department reasonable, unreasonable, or neither?



While visiting the intake office, most respondents (63 percent) say they did not receive any written materials regarding the permitting process (see Figure 10). When we asked those who did not receive any written information (N=26) if printed materials were available, a plurality (46 percent) said they were available compared to 39 percent who said there were not any available. Fifteen percent of respondents said they did not know if materials were available or not. Among those who did receive printed materials, the vast majority say they were not too useful or not useful at all (36 percent and 29 percent, respectively) (see Figure 11).

Figure 10. Did you get any written information from the Intake Department?

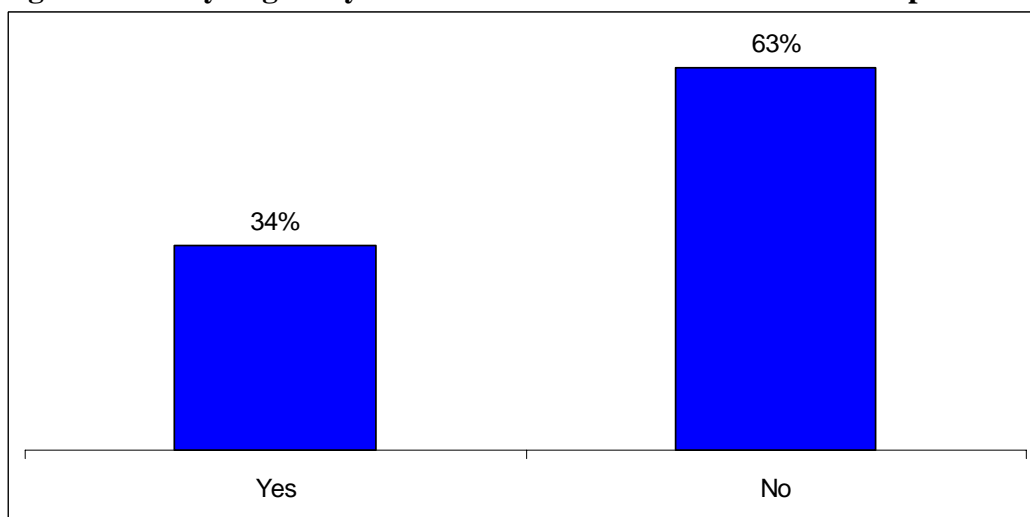
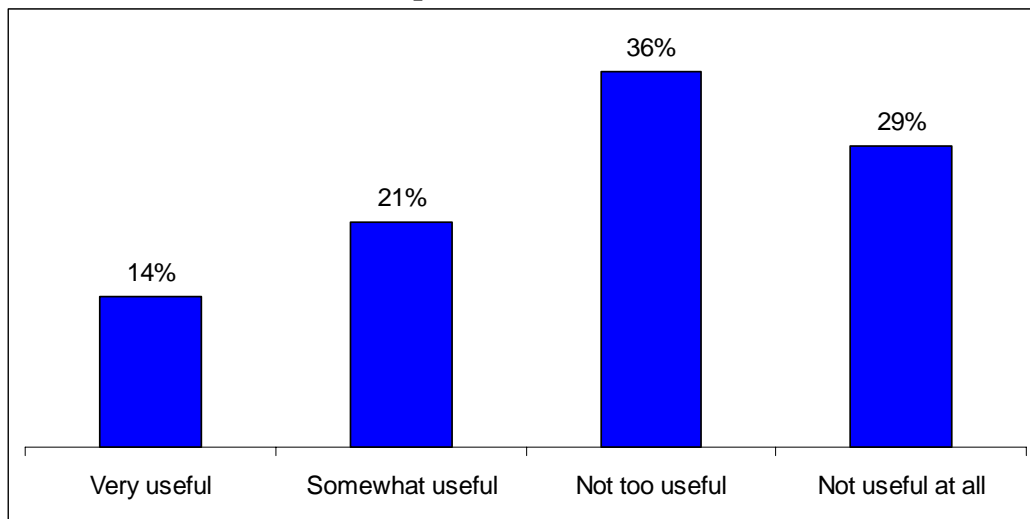
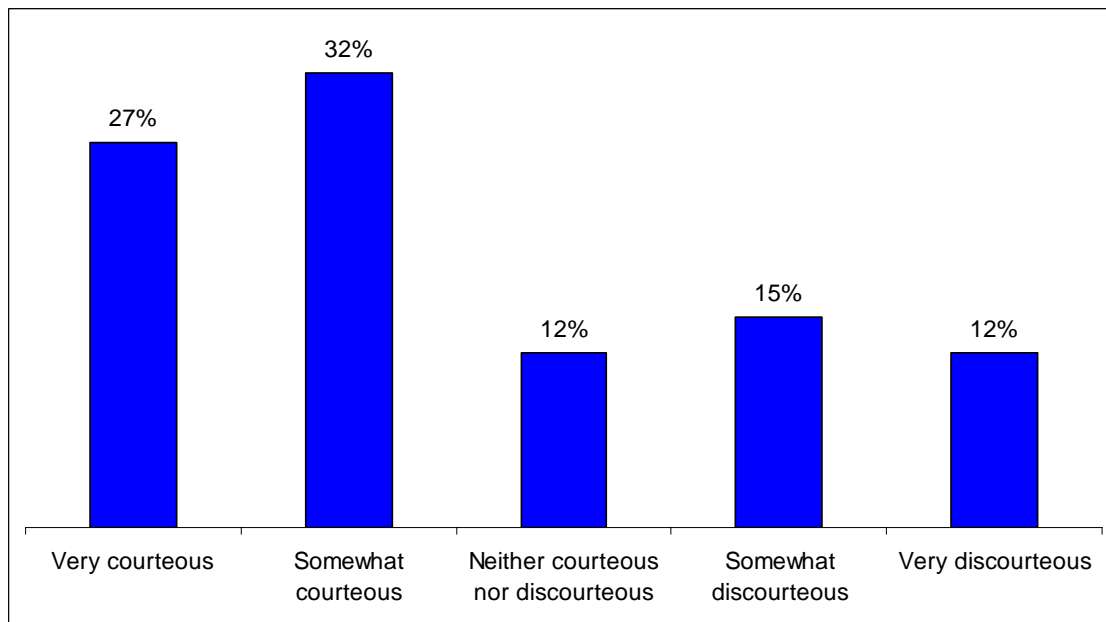


Figure 11. How useful was the printed materials you received from the Intake Department? (N = 14)



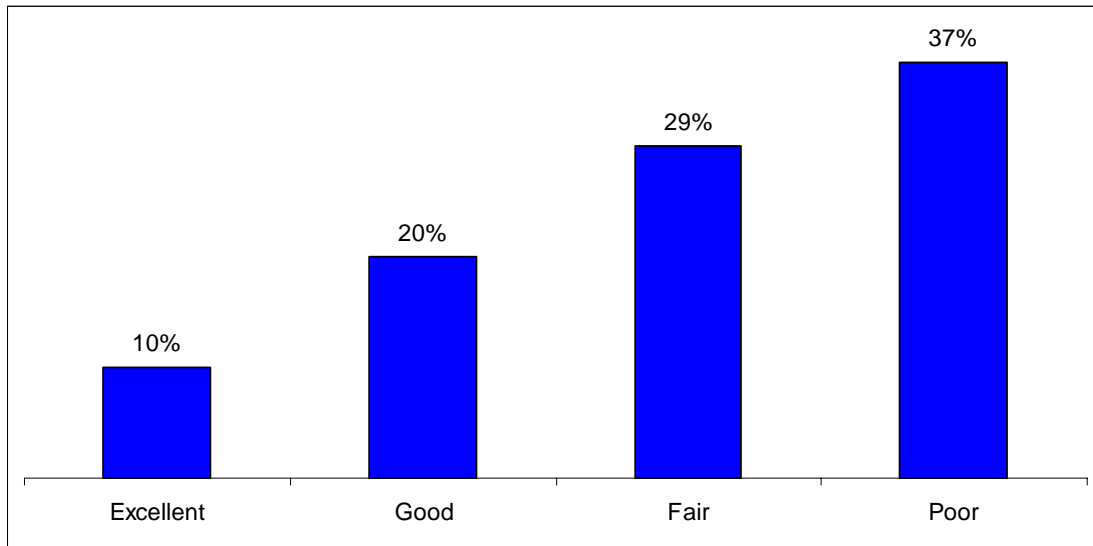
In general, respondents feel that the staff at the Intake Department are relatively courteous. While a majority of respondents feel they are either very or somewhat courteous (27 percent and 32 percent, respectively) there remains a sizeable percentage (27 percent) who feel they are either somewhat or very discourteous (see Figure 12). These are among the lowest courtesy ratings of any departments for which we collected data.

Figure 12. How courteous was the Intake Department Staff?



While most respondents feel the staff are generally courteous, customers are less satisfied with how the Intake staff explains the process of applying for a permit. We asked respondents “Did the Intake staff do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you needed to take in order to complete the permitting process?” About two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) feel that the staff at the Intake department did a fair or poor job of explaining the steps needed to complete the permitting process (29 percent and 37 percent, respectively) (see Figure 13).

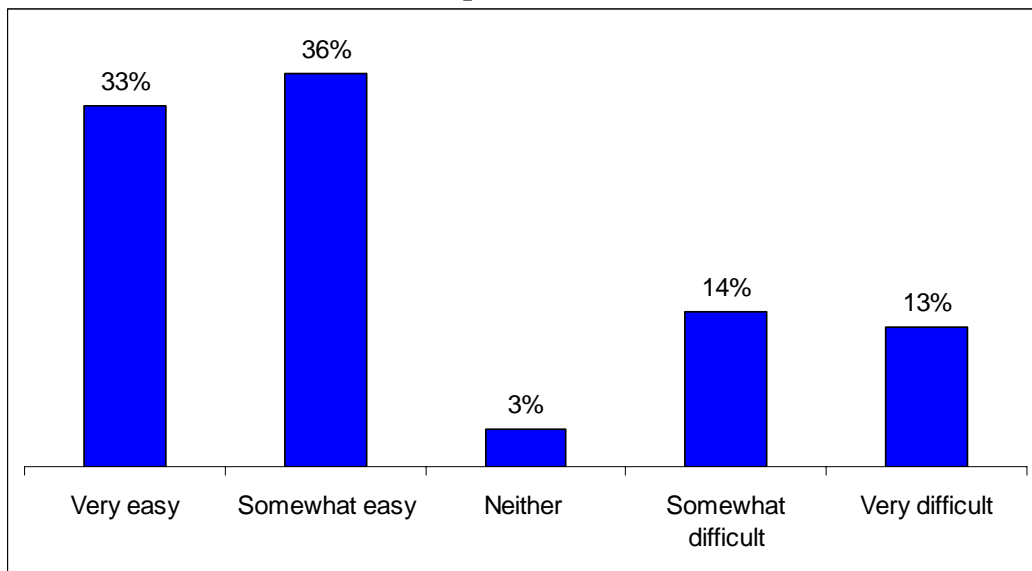
Figure 13. Did the Intake Department staff do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you needed to take in order to complete the permitting process?



Zoning Department

The zoning department is the area where projects are checked for compliance with local zoning ordinances related to the location and use of the building for which the permit is requested. The City of Atlanta, like many cities its size, has numerous zoning ordinances for those building within the city limits. This alone could potentially lead to confusion among those applying for building permits. Despite this, nearly seven in ten respondents (69 percent) say that it is easy to understand the zoning requirements (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Would you say it was easy or difficult to understand the zoning requirements?



Respondents are also pleased with how the Zoning Department explains the reasons behind the zoning requirements. A majority of respondents⁹ feel the Zoning staff did an excellent (21percent) or good (37 percent) job of explaining the reasons behind the requirements. In addition, the majority of respondents (64 percent) say that the Zoning Department did an excellent or good job at explaining the steps needed to comply with zoning requirements (see Figure 15)¹⁰.

⁹ N = 230

¹⁰ These are two questions intended to gauge how helpful the staff is in showing customers through their part of the process. The first question is worded as “In your opinion, did the zoning department do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the reasons behind the zoning requirements?” However, this question was worded incorrectly in the first iteration of the survey and the responses from that iteration have been excluded for that reason thus making the n size smaller. The second question of the pair was worded as “In your opinion, did the zoning department do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you need to take to comply with the zoning requirements?”

Figure 15. Did the Zoning Department staff do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the reasons behind the zoning requirements? (N = 230)

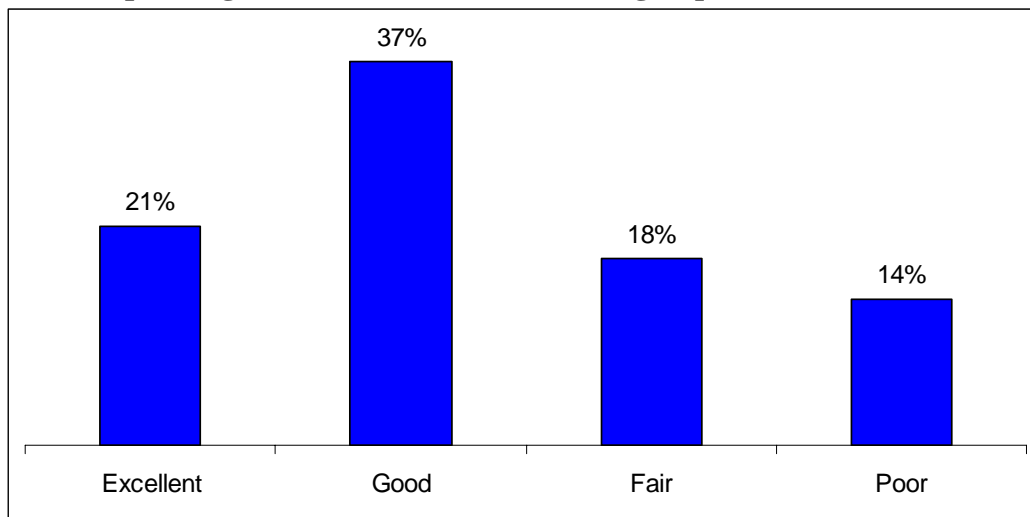
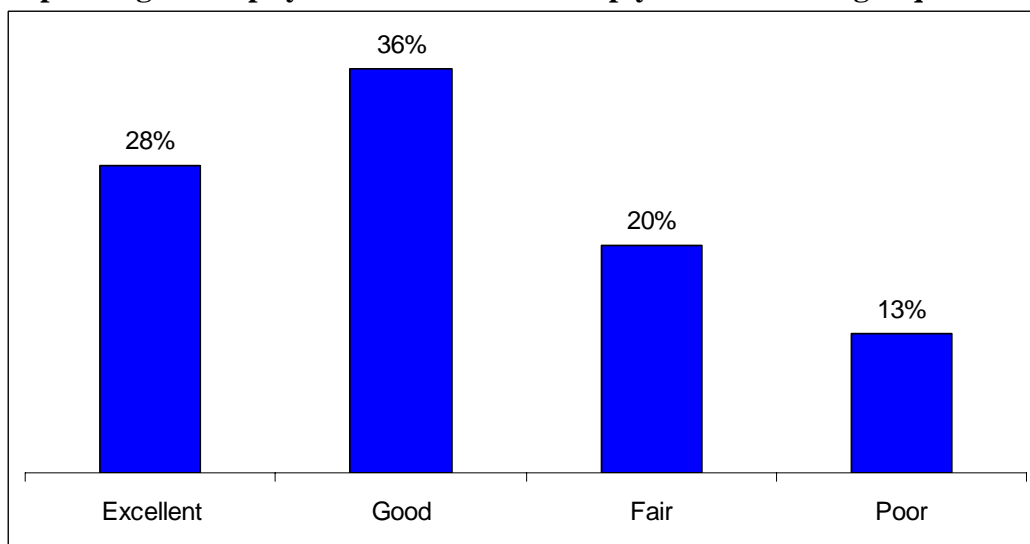
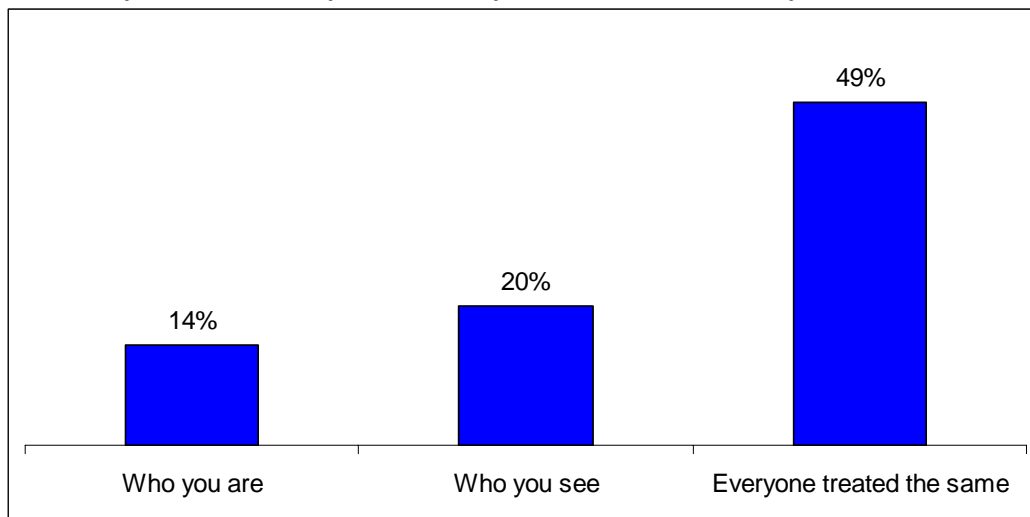


Figure 16. Did the Zoning Department staff do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you need to take to comply with the zoning requirements?



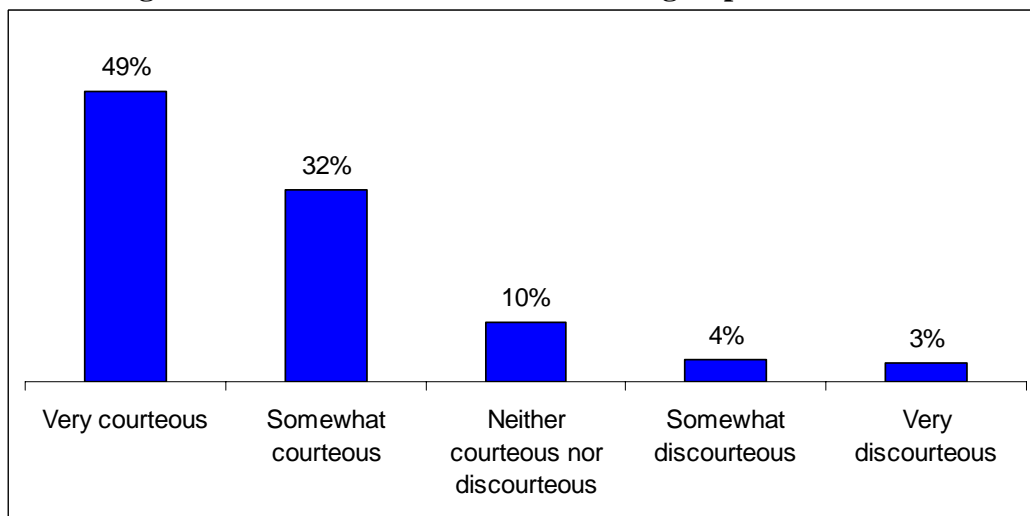
Anecdotal evidence has suggested that some customers feel as though there is a lack of consistency in enforcement of rules and regulations among various departments. In order to gauge this sentiment, we asked respondents: “In your opinion, is the enforcement of zoning regulations was largely dependent on who you are, who you see that day, or are the regulations enforced consistently across the board?” Nearly half of all respondents (49 percent) feel that zoning regulations are enforced in the same manner from one customer to the next. According to respondents, any bias that might exist is more likely to be as a result of who you see that day instead of who you are personally (20 percent and 14 percent, respectively) (see Figure 17).

Figure 17. Is the enforcement of zoning regulations largely dependant on who you are, who you see that day, or are they enforced consistently across the board?



In addition to being generally fair to customers, respondents feel that the staff at the zoning department are courteous as well. An overwhelming majority of respondents (82 percent) feel that that the staff is either very courteous or somewhat courteous to customers (49 percent and 32 percent, respectively). Very few respondents say the staff were discourteous in any manner (see Figure 18).

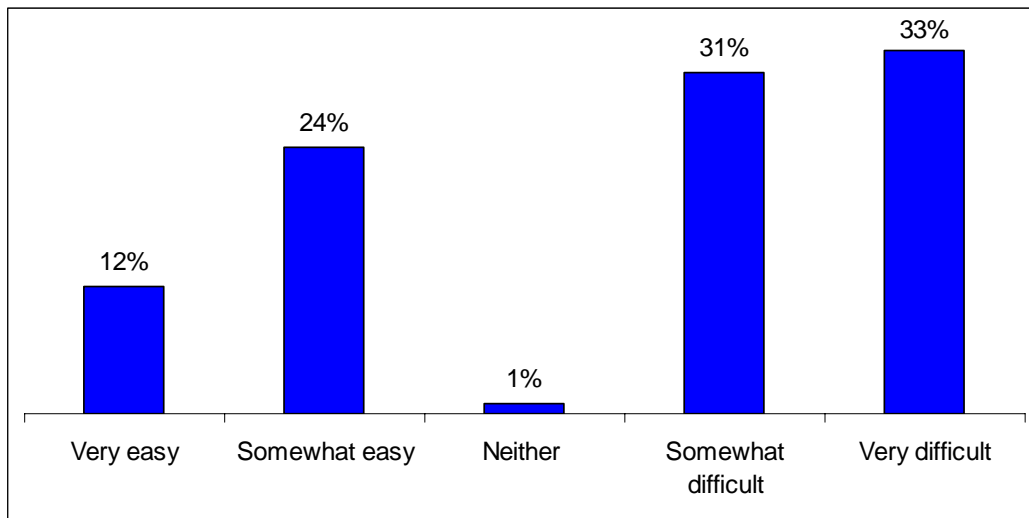
Figure 18. How courteous was the Zoning Department Staff?



Site Development Department

The site development department is the area where project plans are reviewed for any land disturbing activities that may happen as a result of building or renovation. A third of respondents (33 percent) feel that the permitting requirements regarding site disturbance are very difficult to understand and an additional 31 percent feel that they are somewhat difficult (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Was it easy or difficult to understand permitting requirements regarding site disturbance?



In addition to the regulations being difficult to understand, a majority of respondents feel that the site development department does either a fair or poor job of explaining both the reasons behind the requirements and the steps needed to take in order to comply with the requirements. Specifically, 39 percent of respondents say that the Site Development staff did a poor job of explaining the reasons behind the site disturbance requirements. An additional 31 percent said they did a fair job. Only 9 percent felt as though the staff did an excellent job (see Figure 20). Respondents feel the staff did a slightly better job of explaining the steps needed to take in order to comply with the requirements although a majority of respondents (67 percent) still feel the staff did a poor or fair job (35 percent and 32 percent, respectively) (see Figure 21).

Figure 20. Did the Site Development staff do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the reasons behind the site disturbance requirements?

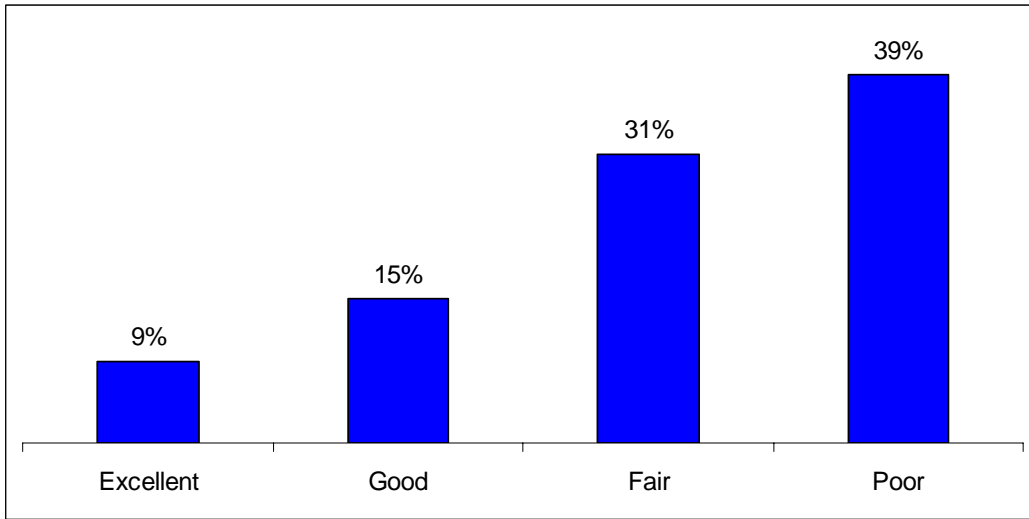
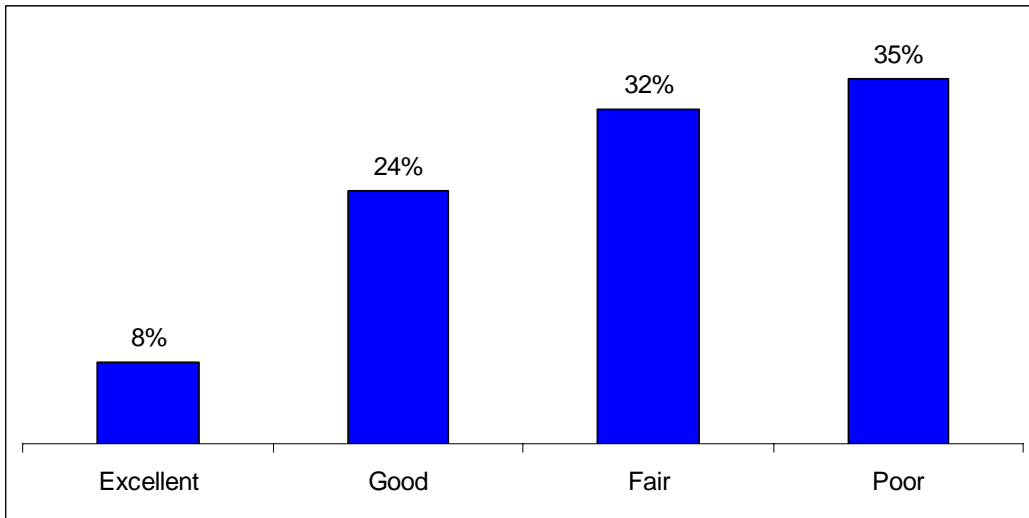
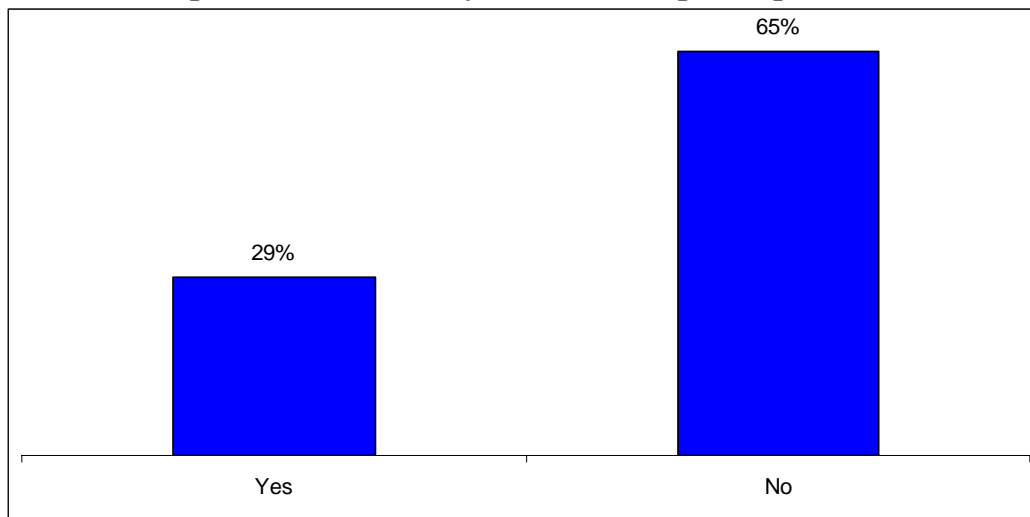


Figure 21. Did the Site Development staff do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you need to take to comply with site review requirements?



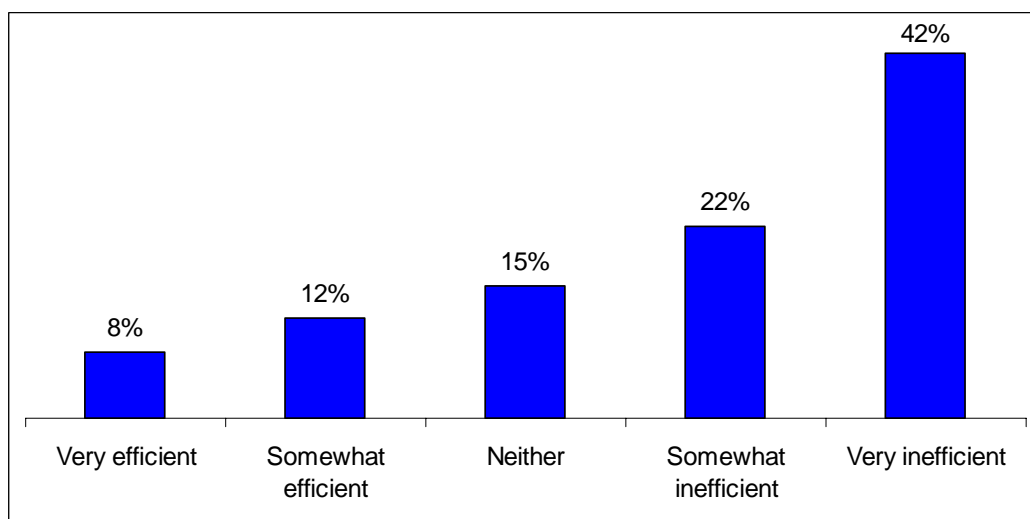
Timeliness and efficiency also appear to be issues that respondents have with the site development department. A majority of respondents (65 percent) say that the site development department did not notify them in a timely manner about required changes, issues, or problems related to their site development plans (see Figure 22). When interpreting this however, one should be cautious and take into consideration that these perceptions are based upon unknown expectations. In other words, while respondents may feel they were not notified in a timely manner this survey cannot speak to whether or not the respondent's definition of timely is reasonable.

Figure 22. Were you notified in a timely manner about required changes, issues, or problems related to your site development plans?



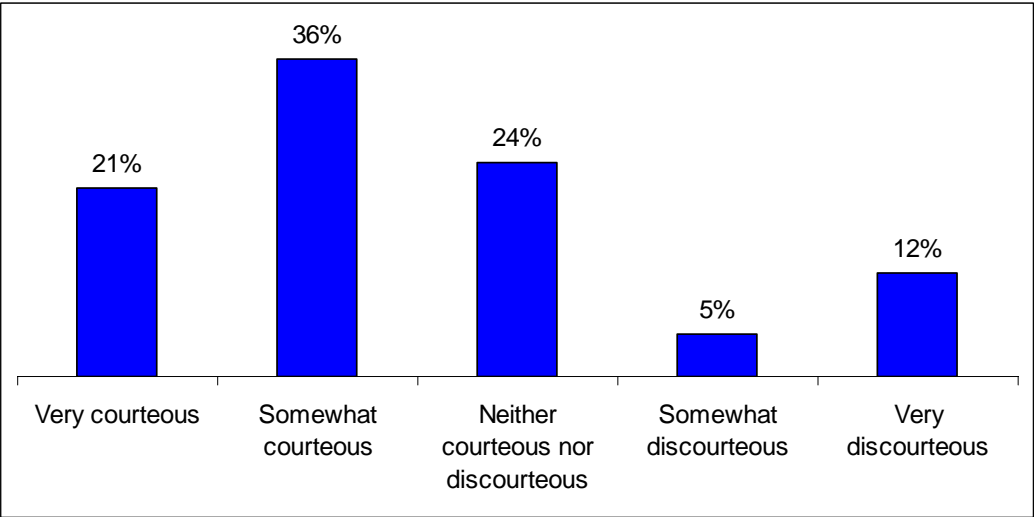
When asked to think of all the times they had to contact the Site Development department about their permit application, 42 percent feel as though the department was very inefficient and an additional 22 percent feel they were somewhat inefficient (see Figure 23)¹¹. Despite this, a majority of respondents feel the staff are either very courteous or somewhat courteous (21 percent and 36 percent, respectively). Even though most respondents feel the staff is courteous, there is a sizeable portion of respondents (17 percent) who disagree (see Figure 24).

Figure 23. Would you say the Site Development Department is efficient, inefficient, or neither?



¹¹ Exact question wording was: “Now, thinking about the number of times you had to contact the site development department about your building permit, would you say the site development department is efficient, inefficient, or neither?” Respondents were then probed for very efficient, somewhat efficient, somewhat inefficient, or very inefficient.

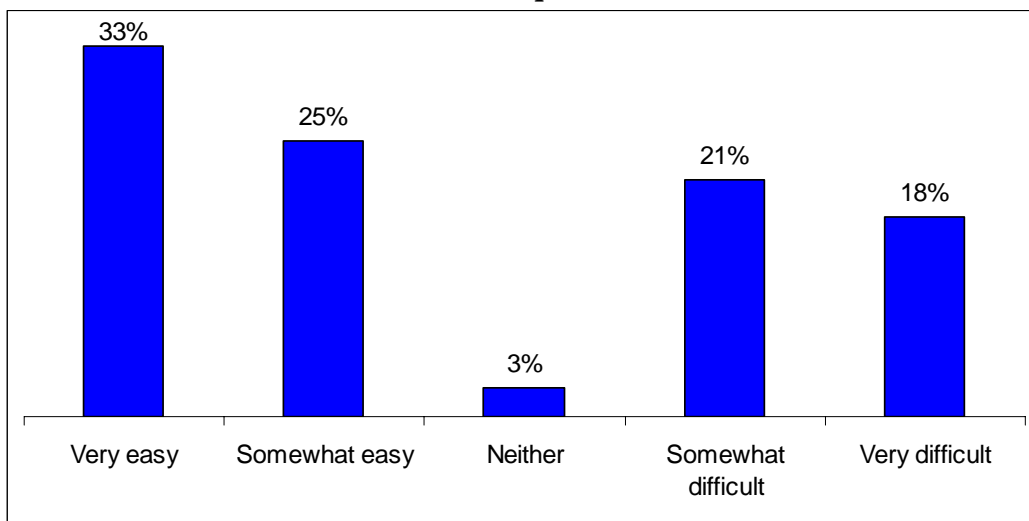
Figure 24. How courteous was the Site Development Staff?



Arborist Department

The Arborist Department is responsible for reviewing the impact of building projects on trees at the construction site in accordance with tree protection ordinances. In general, respondents find it easy to understand tree protection ordinances. One third of respondents find it very easy to understand the ordinances, and 25 percent say that the ordinances are somewhat easy to understand. Despite the majority of respondents having little difficulty with the regulations, 39 percent of respondents found these ordinances either very difficult or somewhat to understand (see Figure 25).

Figure 25. Would you say it was easy or difficult to understand the tree protection ordinance requirements?



More respondents feel as though the staff at the Arborist Department did an excellent or good job at explaining the reasons behind the tree protection ordinances than did those who feel they did a fair or poor job. The difference is not too great however, with 23 percent feeling they did an excellent job compared to 15 percent who feel they did a poor job (see Figure 26). Despite this, a plurality of respondents (37 percent) feel the staff did a good job of explaining the steps needed to take in order to comply with the tree protection ordinances and another 25 percent feel they did an excellent job (see Figure 27).

Figure 26. Did the staff at the Arborist department do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the reasons behind the tree protection ordinances?

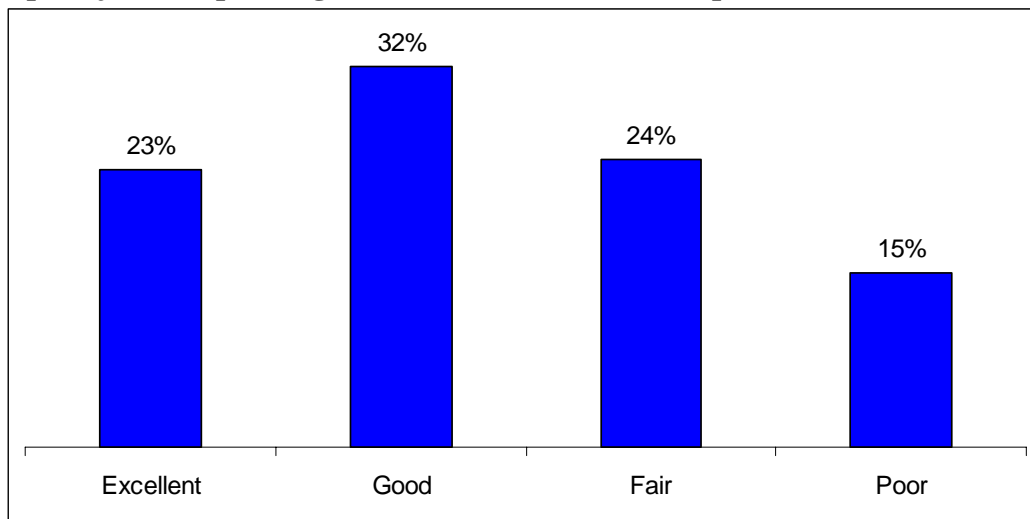
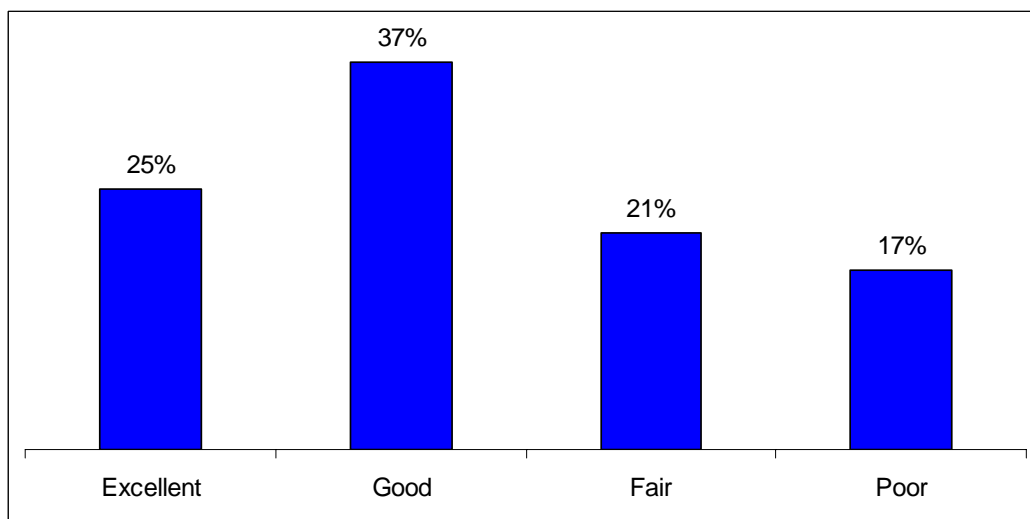
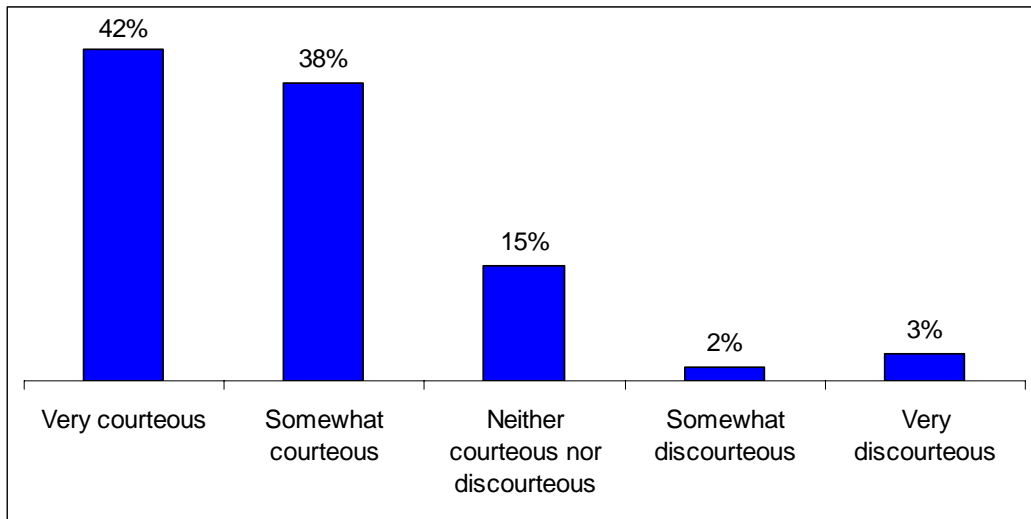


Figure 27. Did the staff at the Arborist department do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you need to take in order to comply with the tree ordinances?



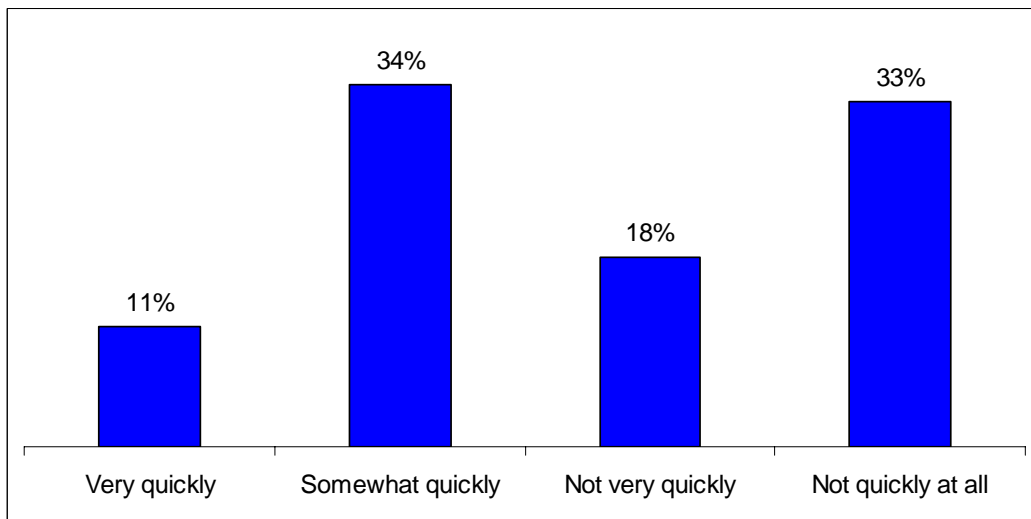
Eight in ten respondents (80 percent) say the staff are either very courteous or somewhat courteous (42 percent and 38 percent, respectively). Very few respondents (less than 5 percent) felt that the staff was discourteous at all (see Figure 28). These results suggest the possibility that respondents confound explaining the reasons behind the regulations and the steps to comply with them with courtesy.

Figure 28. How courteous was the staff at the Arborist Department?



Slightly more than half of the respondents (52 percent) had an Arborist visit their site. These respondents¹² are almost equally divided on how long they felt it took the Arborist to visit their site with a slight majority (51 percent) who say the Arborist did not visit their site very quickly (see Figure 29). As is the case with this question, we cannot show the basis of the respondent's perception of what is timely.

Figure 29. How quickly was an Arborist able to visit your site? (N = 61)

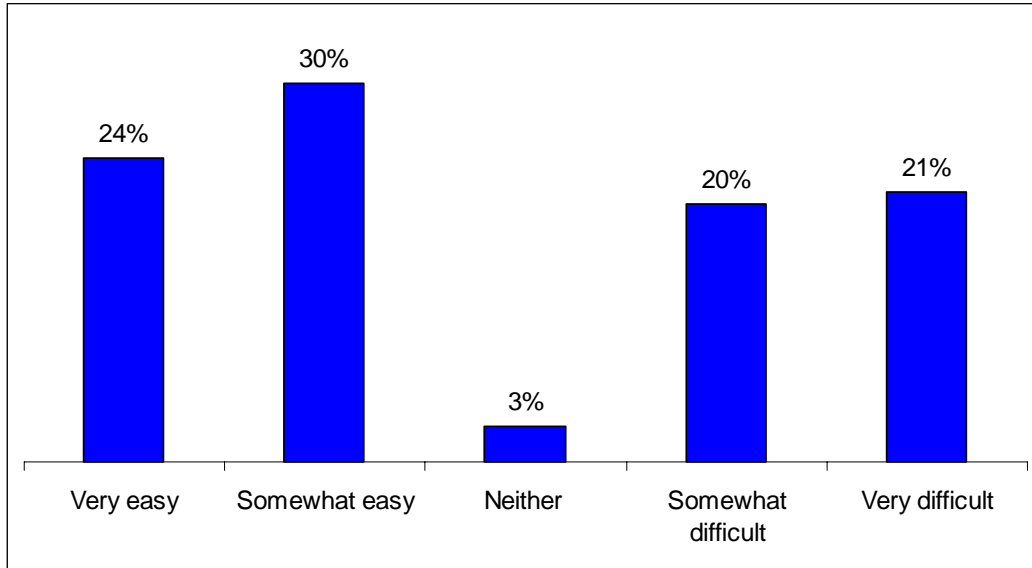


¹² N = 61

Plan Review Department

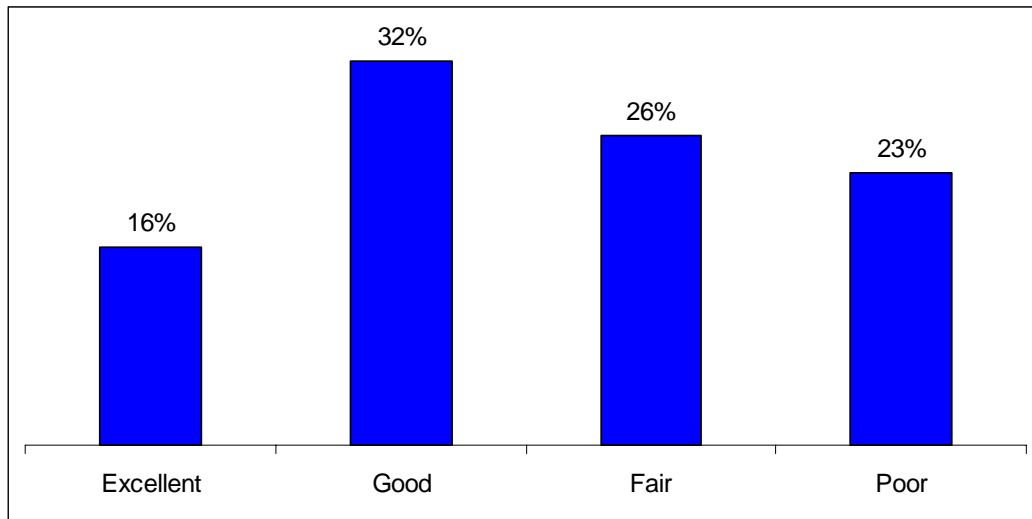
The Plan Review Department is charged with reviewing architectural and structural drawings associated with a building permit application. More respondents feel as though it is easy to understand plan review requirements (54 percent) as do those who feel it is not easy (41 percent) (see Figure 30).

Figure 30. Was it easy or difficult to understand the plan review requirements?



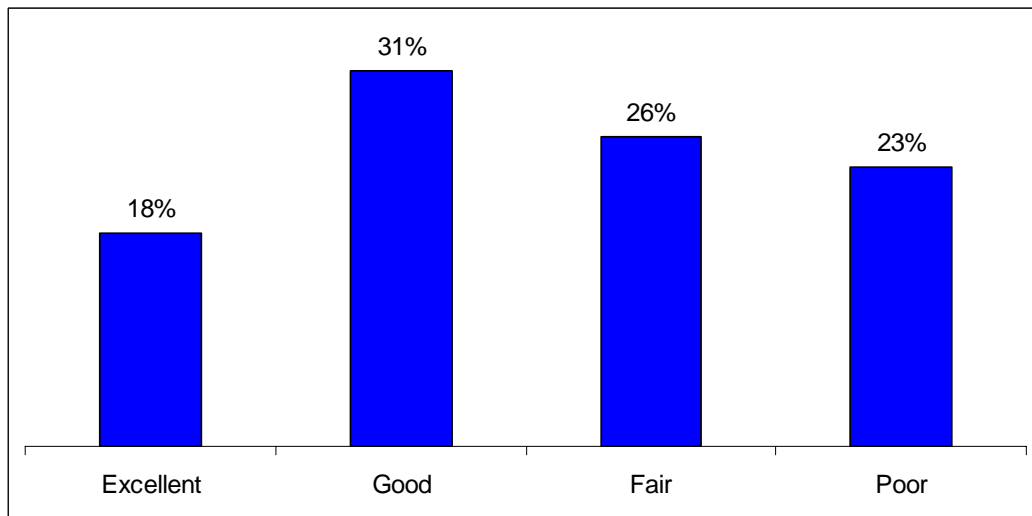
Considering the fact that 4 out of 10 respondents have some level of difficulty understanding the plan review requirements, it is important that the staff take steps to explain the process to the customer. Respondents are almost equally divided in their opinions concerning how the well staff explained the plan review requirements. Nearly a third of respondents (32 percent) say that the staff did a good job of explaining the reasons behind the requirements while an additional 16 percent feel as though they did an excellent job. Almost half (49 percent) say they did either a fair or poor job (26 percent and 23 percent, respectively) (see Figure 31).

Figure 31. Did the staff at the Plan Review department do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the reasons behind the plan review requirements?



When it comes to explaining the steps required in order to comply with plan review requirements, respondents are equally divided. Forty-nine percent of respondents feel they did an excellent or good job of explaining the steps necessary to comply with plan review requirements while the other 49 percent feel they did a fair or poor job (see Figure 32).

Figure 32. Did the staff at the Plan Review department do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you need to take to comply with plan review requirements?



In terms of timeliness and efficiency, 50 percent of respondents feel that they were notified in a timely manner about required changes, issues, or problems related to their construction drawings (see Figure 33). Respondents were less pleased when asked about efficiency. Slightly more than one-third of respondents (35 percent) feel that the plan review department was very inefficient when it came to handling their building permit, and another 14 percent feel they were somewhat inefficient. Only 16 percent feel they were very efficient (see Figure 34).

Figure 33. Were you notified in a timely manner about required changes, issues, or problems related to your construction drawings?

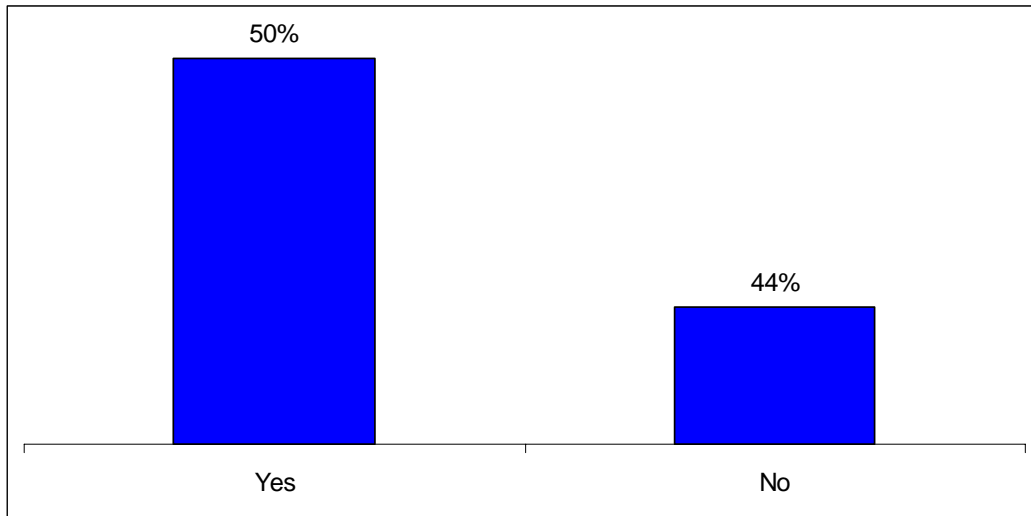
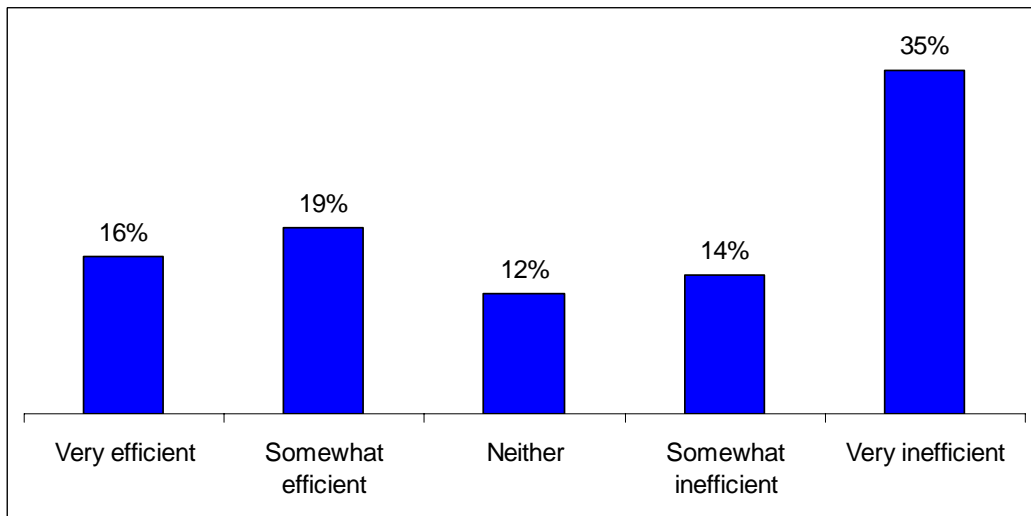
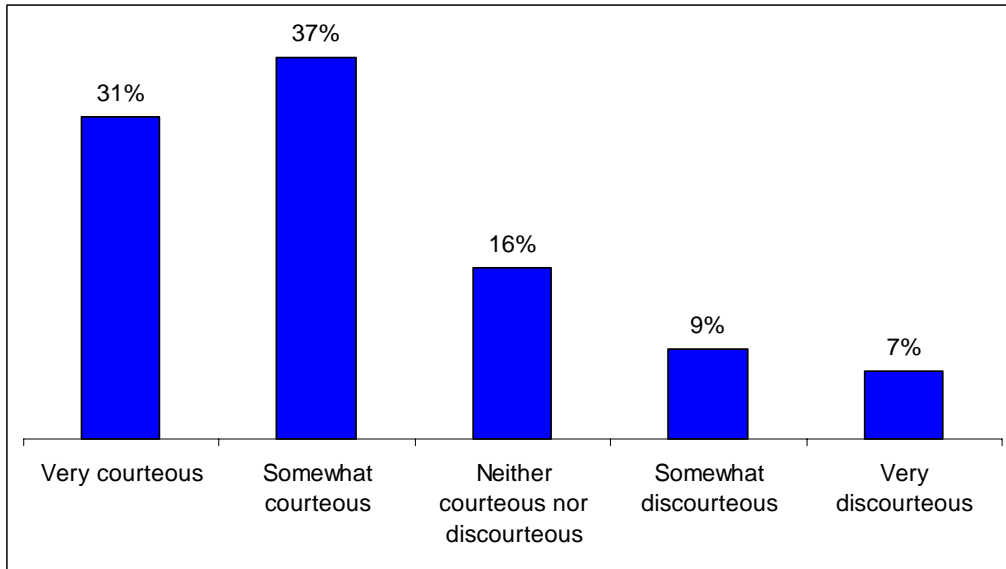


Figure 34. Would you say the Plan Review department is efficient, inefficient, or neither?



Despite some concerns about efficiency, the vast majority of respondents feel that the plan review staff was courteous. Thirty-one percent of respondents say they were very courteous and an additional 37 percent say they were somewhat courteous. Only 16 percent of respondents feel as though the staff was either somewhat or very discourteous (see Figure 35).

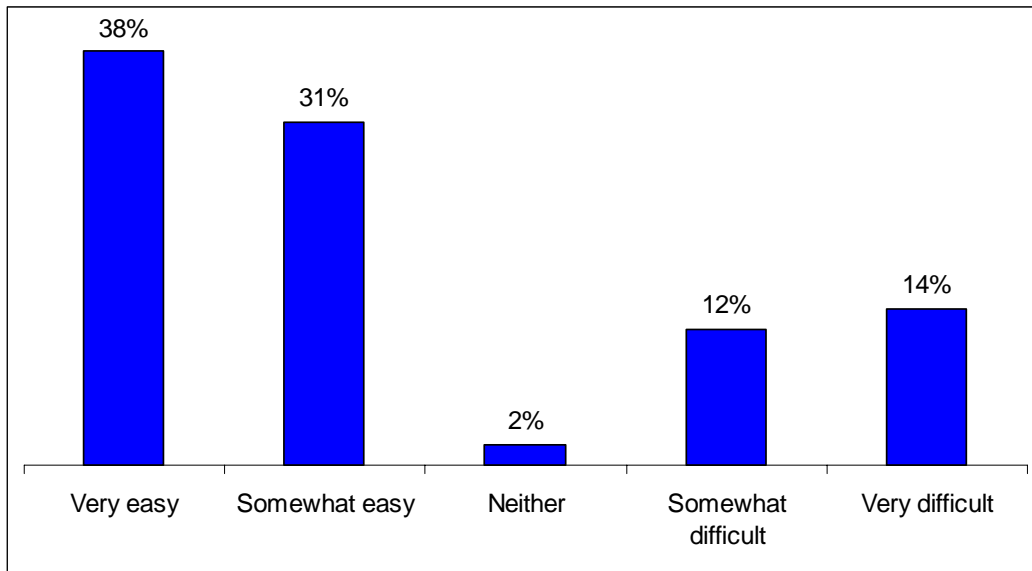
Figure 35. How courteous was the Plan Review staff?



Inspections Department

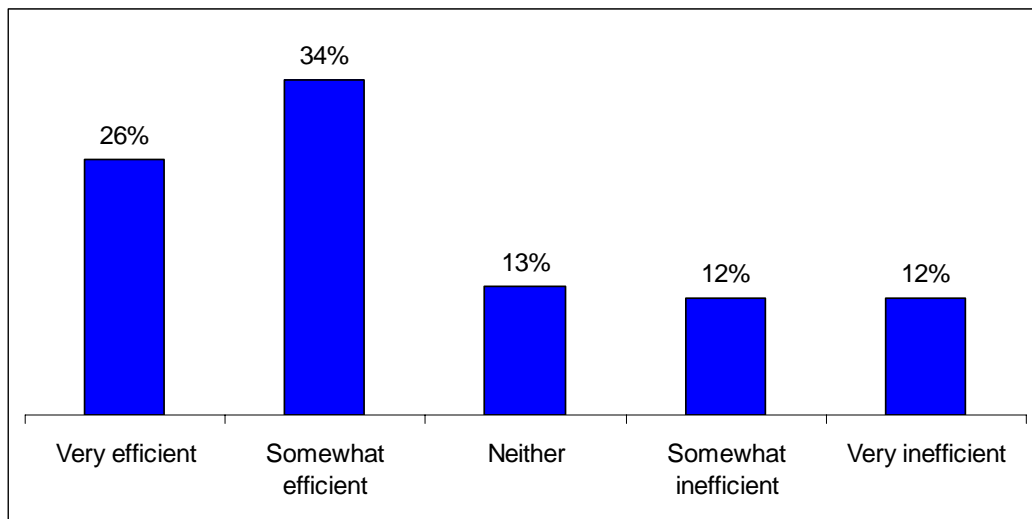
The Inspections Department reviews technical system plans, such as HVAC, electrical, plumbing or elevator systems, and it is also the area that conducts site inspections of project work for compliance with local building codes and construction requirements. Much of the work of the Inspections department occurs out-of-office and on-site. The nature of their work requires inspectors often to schedule and reschedule appointments; however, most respondents do not find it very difficult to schedule an inspection. Thirty-eight percent of respondents say it was very easy and 31 percent say it was somewhat easy to schedule an inspection (see Figure 36).

Figure 36. Was it easy or difficult to schedule an inspection?



In addition to ease in scheduling, respondents generally feel as though the inspection department is efficient. When asked about the number of times they had to contact the inspection department about their last permit, half of the respondents say the inspections department is either very efficient or somewhat efficient (26 percent and 34 percent, respectively) (see Figure 37).

Figure 37. Would you say that the Inspections department is efficient, inefficient, or neither?



The vast majority of respondents (65 percent) say the inspector did an excellent or good job of explaining the reasons behind the building requirements (see Figure 38). Similarly, 66 percent of respondents feel that the inspector did an excellent or good job of explaining the steps needed to take in order to comply with the building requirements (see Figure 39).

Figure 38. Did the Inspector do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the reasons behind the building requirements?

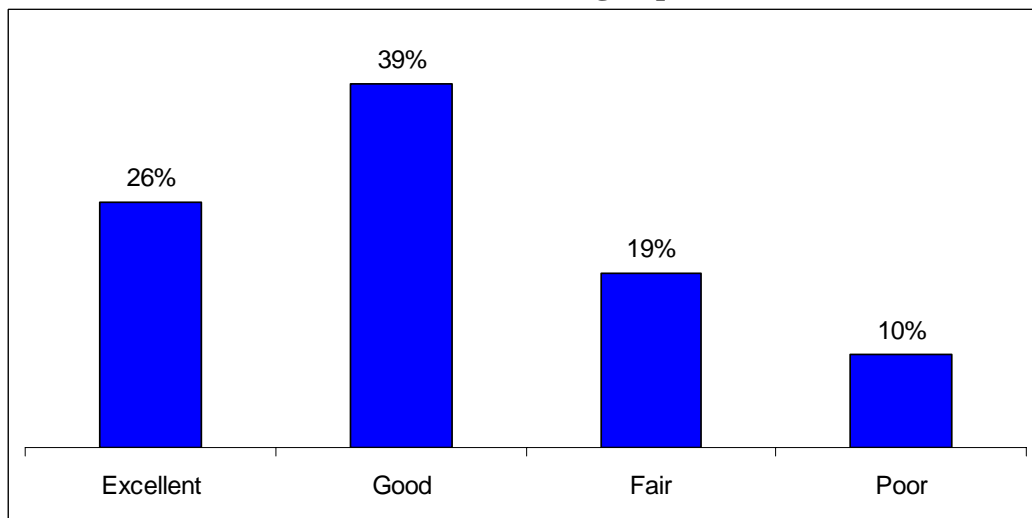
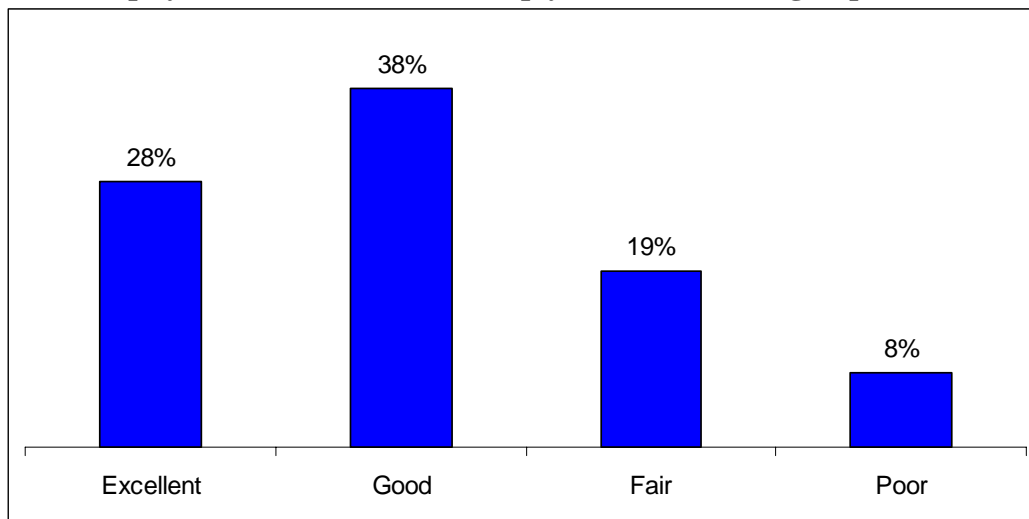


Figure 39. Did the Inspector do an excellent, good, fair, or poor job of explaining the steps you needed to take to comply with the building requirements?



Enforcement of building code requirements by inspectors is generally seen as a fair process. Fifty-six percent of respondents feel that building code requirements are enforced consistently across the board. Twenty-seven percent feel enforcement of codes depends on who you see that day and 11 percent say enforcement is dependant on who you are (see Figure 40). In addition to conducting a fair inspection process, respondents feel as if the inspectors treat them with courtesy. About three-quarters of respondents say that the inspector was either very courteous (45 percent) or somewhat courteous (29 percent). Less than 10 percent of respondents say the inspector was somewhat or very discourteous (4 percent and 5 percent, respectively) (see Figure 41).

Figure 40. Is the enforcement of building code requirements largely dependant on who you are, who you see that day, or are they enforced consistently across the board?

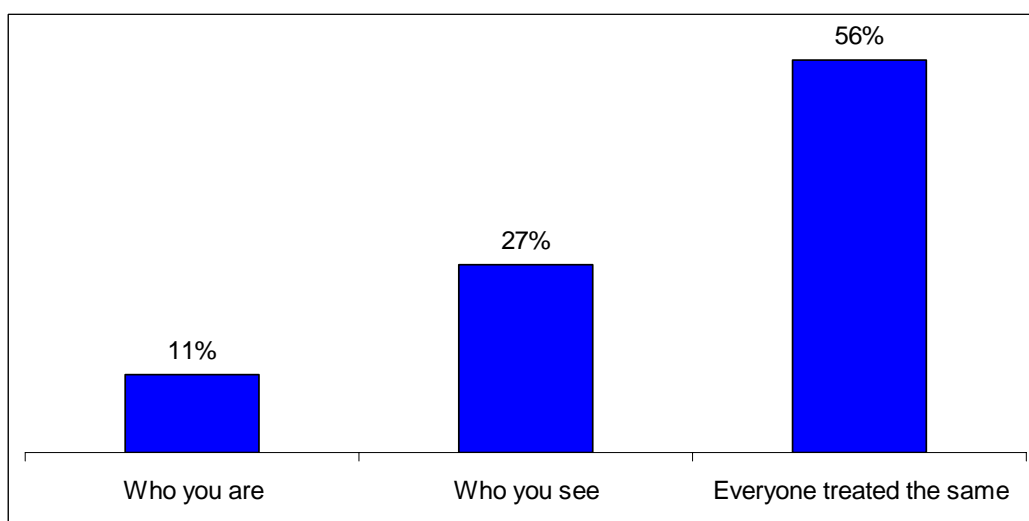
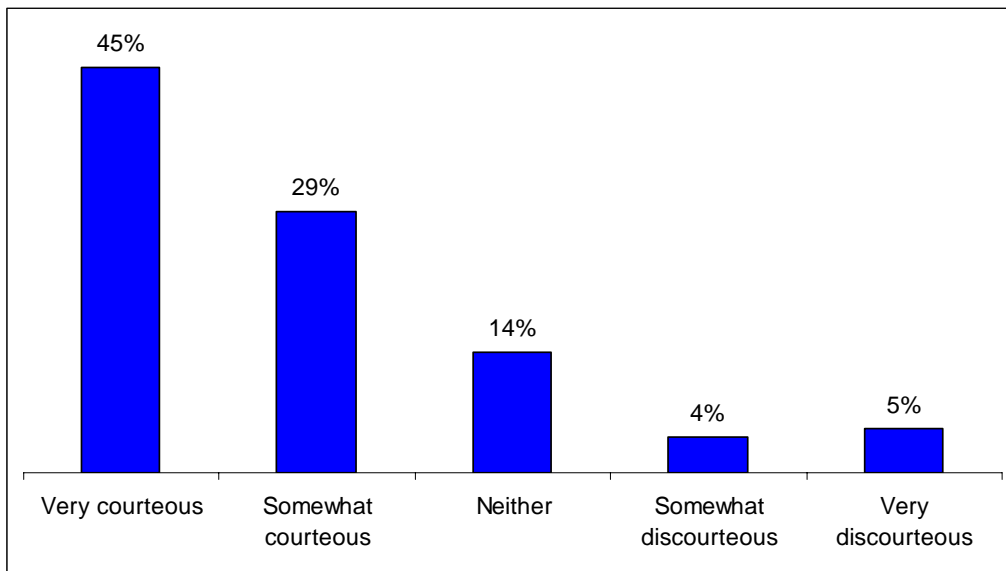


Figure 41. How courteous was the Inspector?



Other Departments Feedback

After respondents answered the general questions about the City of Atlanta permitting process and the individual departments their permit was mapped to, we asked if there were any departments they visited that we did not ask them about. Respondents were allowed to identify 3 additional departments. If the respondent did visit additional departments, they were then asked about their overall satisfaction with each department¹³. If they were dissatisfied to any degree, we asked them to identify the main reason that they were dissatisfied with that particular department. Verbatim reasons for dissatisfaction are presented by department in Appendix C.

¹³ The number of respondents who visited additional departments is 195. While this number may seem large, it is spread across 11 options. The largest number of respondents for any one department was 28 which is considered small. Because of the low number of respondents, it makes any satisfaction breakouts by department meaningless. Instead of presenting percentages for levels of satisfaction, we have chosen to present verbatim responses for those who are dissatisfied in order to provide feedback for each workgroup.

CONCLUSION

The survey data presented in this report highlights areas where there is a need for improvement as well as areas where departments are meeting or exceeding customer expectations. Overall, respondents give the City of Atlanta high marks on its handling of the respondent's most recent permit application. Twenty-one percent of respondents give the permitting process an "A" and 31 percent give it a "B". There is still room for improvement however, particularly with those respondents who give the city a "C", "D", or "F" (23 percent, 14 percent, and 10 percent, respectively).

In addition to giving high marks to the City of Atlanta permitting process as a whole, respondents generally feel that the staff in the various departments are courteous. With one exception, all departments had a majority of respondents who feel that the staff was generally courteous and relatively few (less than 20 percent) who feel they were discourteous. The exception to this was the Intake Department which had the highest percentage of respondents who said the staff was somewhat discourteous or very discourteous (15 percent and 12 percent, respectively). Considering the fact that the Intake Department is often the first contact that customers have with the City of Atlanta permitting process, this is one area where immediate change could improve customer experiences.

Within each department there are requirements which must be satisfied in order for a permit to be approved by that department. Often, these requirements can be difficult to understand, thus requiring the staff to explain the reasons behind requirements as well as assist the customer in understanding what he/she must do in order to comply with these requirements. Of the two questions we asked to gauge helpfulness, only Zoning, Arborist, and Inspections had a majority of respondents who feel they did an excellent or good job at explaining both the reasons behind requirements and the steps needed to address them. The other two departments in which we asked these questions, Site Development and Plan Review, each had less than half of the respondents who felt they did an excellent or good job in both areas. Similar to courtesy, this is an area where immediate change could drastically improve customer experiences with the permitting process. Immediate steps to improve the customer experience could have the long-term effect of improving customer perception around the permitting process.

Another issue of concern is timeliness and efficiency with the permitting process. Of the departments we asked specifically about efficiency¹⁴, Site Development, Plan Review, and Inspections, 2 out of 3 had substantially more respondents who felt they were inefficient than efficient. The exception was the Inspection Department, in which a

¹⁴ The exact wording of the question was "Now, thinking about the number of times you had to contact the [specific department name] department about your building permit, would you say the [specific department name] department is efficient, inefficient, or neither?" Respondents were then probed by degree of efficiency or inefficiency with the statement "Would you say they were very efficient/inefficient or somewhat efficient/inefficient?" There were 6 work groups selected to receive this question. They are: Site Development, Plan Review, Public Works/Traffic, Fire Safety, Inspections, and the Bureau of Planning. Of the 6 departments, only Site Development, Plan Review, and Inspections departments had enough responses generally to be included in this report.

majority of respondents (61 percent) feel they are efficient. In addition to displeasure with individual department's level of efficiency, when respondents were asked what they would change about the City of Atlanta permitting process, the most frequently cited response was to generally improve timeliness and efficiency around the permitting process.

As the City of Atlanta moves forward with improving customer experiences during the permitting process, it is important to look not only at each department, but at the process as a whole and how that process compares with other counties and cities. Over three-quarters of customers are repeat customers to the City of Atlanta and while there is only a weak correlation, there are some initial indications that those with repeat experiences hold slightly more critical views than do those who have only had one experience. While we cannot say with certainty the reasons for this, respondent statements indicate that customers may be comparing the City of Atlanta's permitting process with other counties and cities. Additional indications from respondents are that some types of customers meet more resistance from staff than do others, thereby making the process more frustrating for everyone involved.

These data form the baseline for measuring customer satisfaction with the City of Atlanta's permitting process. They are a first step in a progression that will provide more detailed information which can be used to understand customer experiences and perceptions around the City of Atlanta permitting process. Future iterations of this survey will hopefully provide feedback for all departments as well as serve as a means to gauge changes in the process.